

STATEMENT FROM THE
PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION

WORLD NO-TOBACCO DAY
MAY 31, 1990

Good morning. I would like to thank the organizers of this meeting and particularly the Surgeon General, Dr. Antonia Novello, for the opportunity to participate in this event.

It is a happy coincidence that this new initiative to restrict the access of minors to the purchase of cigarettes is being launched today, because today, May 31, is World No-Tobacco Day and the theme for this day, which is being observed world-wide, is "Childhood and Youth Without Tobacco." Let me congratulate you, Dr. Novello, in this initiative.

The World Health Organization and the Pan American Health Organization are focusing on smoking and youth as part of their effort to encourage governments, communities, groups and individuals to ban the use of tobacco. We are particularly concerned about the youth, as children are often innocent victims of tobacco through passive smoking.

Unborn children may pay a high price for their mothers' smoking habits. Smoking during pregnancy has been associated with premature births, spontaneous abortion, fetal and perinatal deaths; it also causes the Fetal Tobacco Syndrome, which is associated with low-birth weight, poor growth, and possible congenital defects. Young people are increasingly the object of deliberate manipulation by tobacco companies whose survival depends on this future market as they try to compensate for the large number of adult smokers who die or stop smoking. Our youth are being tempted by slick publicity campaigns which falsely associate youth, beauty, success, wealth, sports, and sex with smoking. It is alarming to note that 3,000 adolescents take up smoking each day in the United States, and the pattern is being repeated in the rest of the continent. We agonize because a significant proportion of those who start smoking in their youth acquire the habit for life, and even worse is the fact that in many cases, tobacco represents a "transition drug" which leads to other, more serious addictions.

Tobacco use is starting at earlier and earlier ages, particularly among young women in industrialized countries, and among adolescents in developing countries. Despite some laws restricting advertising and access to tobacco, too many young people still consider smoking socially acceptable, partly due to clever advertising linking smoking with fun. Advertising directly influences the decision to start smoking, and in countries where tobacco advertising has been restricted, such as Norway, there has been a reduction in smoking prevalence among young people.

This deliberate attempt to induce the youth to smoke more is carried out, not only through well-designed advertising, but also through the sale of cigarettes in small packages of six or less, or even single cigarettes, which are more affordable to school children and other youth.

The initiative which the United States Surgeon General is launching today on preventing the sale of tobacco to minors is an opportune and potentially powerful mechanism for reducing consumption of tobacco among youth.

There is very gross evidence that tobacco use and production continue to increase in Latin America, but our data are incomplete. To gain a clearer picture and collect up-to-date information on the use of tobacco in this hemisphere, PAHO and the U.S. Office on Smoking and Health have agreed to work together, and with the assistance of experts in tobacco control, economics, health, marketing, law; and other fields, we are preparing a joint report on "Smoking in the Americas." This report will constitute a major step towards focusing international cooperation on addressing the epidemic of tobacco use and its consequences. I wish to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Novello for her support of this project.

2026172380

We know that prevention and control of tobacco consumption are technically and economically feasible, as well as socially necessary and politically viable. But we do not have the resources of the tobacco companies and cannot afford to match their expensive campaigns with counter-advertisements in order to convince people to stop smoking and help prevent millions of unnecessary deaths. We must rely on the governments, the non-governmental organizations, the schools, and especially young people themselves to join our efforts and work towards the goals of a tobacco-free society. I hope that this meeting will contribute in a significant way to mobilizing the human financial, political, institutional and popular resources necessary for us to reach this goal.

2026172381